

Block play, the sand pit and the doll corner: the (dis)ordering materialities of educating young children

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Abstract:

Recent reconceptualisations of preschool education have tended to treat its role in ordering and subjectifying children with some suspicion. This paper is an attempt to produce a less determined and thereby more hopeful, or at least ambivalent, account of the processes of subjectification by reexamining the peculiar materiality of the nursery. I attempt to redeploy nursery education's traditional emphasis on experiential and environmental learning towards thinking in terms of a performative and affective pedagogy of the event (largely inspired by Deleuze). In so-doing, I conceive of a different kind of 'interactive pedagogy' which enacts myriad encounters and becomings. This reconfigures the relationship between subject and object such that both are understood as continually emergent and constitutionally indeterminate. Thinking in this way is to embrace the disordering that lurks within the very processes of ordering. In this sense, subjectification may not be 'innocent'. but it is necessary nevertheless.

Key words: preschool education, materiality, the event, affect, subjectification

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introduction: what works?

At first glance it might seem odd to talk of order and ordering in the nursery¹. Order is not necessarily the word that comes to mind when confronted with large numbers of children engaged in seemingly aimless 'free play' in an environment cluttered with 'things' - blocks, sand, dolls. Nursery education seems to allow children 'a freedom of being and expression which does not exist elsewhere within the education system' (Dudek, 2000: 6). Yet, the apparent disorder is somewhat illusory: nursery pedagogy may be largely 'invisible' (Bernstein, 1977), but it does exist. Little in the way of 'work' appears to go on but, in the nursery, play is a serious business.

In the educational literature much has been made of the ways in which, despite appearances, preschool education acts as a governmental technology for ordering children (for example, Cannella, 1997, 2000; Dahlberg, 1999; Lubeck, 1996; Silin, 1995; Walkerdine, 1984). I do not want to dwell on what has become a sustained critique in this literature, but a brief summary is necessary here. While more familiar educational practices are largely teacher-directed; preschool education is 'child-centred' (Walkerdine, 1984, in particular). It is in this sense that Basil Bernstein (1977) has referred to nursery pedagogy as 'invisible': the standard practices of freedom in preschool education - of 'free play' or 'free choice' - make it appear that everything comes from the child, that nurseries simply encourage the 'natural' developmental unfolding of individual children. It seems that nursery educators do very little. Yet, this developmental unfolding is far from open-ended, and nursery educators do more than 'babysit'; everything that happens in the nursery is calculated to ensure the 'normal' development of children. Universal developmental norms are enacted in 'developmentally

appropriate practice' which governs both preschool educators and children, ordering them as particular kinds of subject:

'True, we [preschool educators] don't have children sitting at little desks, but we regulate their time and routines, remind them of rules, and surround them with uniform learning materials. We may not ring bells or have long hallways to walk down, but our programmes for children are organised around schedules, standards, checklist, and assessment tools. A more expansive vision for [preschool education] seems a distant consideration' (Curtis and Carter, 2003: 1).

To engage with nursery education is often to pose the question: 'what works?'. The question is implicit in the invisible workings of nursery pedagogy, the seeming inactivity of nursery educators, and in the instrumental production of future workers and citizens (see Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Such engagement seems either impossibly naive - Olds (2000) gives a particularly romanticised view of the nursery - or dismally fatalistic - the nursery simply 'predetermines the lives of others' (Cannella, 2000). Settling aside the romanticism entirely, it is not my intention here to argue that preschool education is 'innocent' of anything for which it stands accused in the literature. But there must more to the nursery than this. By this, I do not mean that I am going to elucidate some ever more opaque and insidious means through which the nursery orders its inhabitants, to uncover some as yet undisclosed procedure. That is not what concerns me. Without being naive, I want to treat the nursery with less suspicion. My contribution here may only be to advance the question - 'what works?' - in a more experimental sense, to evoke a broadly Deleuzian 'pragmatism' such that, '[t]he question is not, Is it true? But, Does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think?' (Massumi, 1992: 8).

To do this, I want to orient myself (at least initially) towards the *visible*, rather than the invisible: to attend to the familiar materials in the nursery - the blocks, the sand, the dolls - and the everyday practices of playing with them. Even so, I am not interested in a straightforward,

concrete materiality. Rather, and largely inspired by Deleuze, I want to explore how the processes of active sensory exploration peculiar to preschool education might be understood as enacting an intangible and affective pedagogy of the event. My intention in so-doing is not to provide a fuller, more accurate explanation of the processes of nursery education, to elucidate how it 'really' happens. I simply want to try to conceive of the processes of subjectification in the nursery in more open-ended ways.

In the next section I construct what can only be described as a 'strategic' history of the nursery tradition, in which I seek to draw out some of the principles from which nursery education proceeds only to redeploy them in different ways later on. I move on to explore the interactions between people and things in the nursery, such that we might conceive of both subject and object as emerging from, rather than causing, interaction. Starting again from the sensate in the fourth section, I begin to 'depersonalise' these becomings so as to open things up to an emergent and incessant pedagogy of the event in the fifth. From there I start to think through the ways in which preschool education might engage with the indeterminacy of the event.

A strategic history of the nursery tradition: experiential and environmental learning

Liz Brooker (2005) has remarked that nursery education has undergone surprisingly little change over the last 300 years or so. In saying this, she is not arguing that nursery education is a static and homogenous field; rather her point is that there has been little *visible* change in the day-to-day practice of educating young children. To the untrained eye it still looks like small children playing with toys. Nursery education may have been reconceptualised in various ways over the years, but the endurance of certain principles have made it appear that little has changed. Briefly summarised, nursery pedagogy can be said to be characterised by *experiential and environmental learning*. In this section, and at some risk of caricature, I want to explore some of the ways in which action, embodiment, sensory

learning and materiality have been mobilised in particular approaches to nursery education. I make no claim to anything resembling a comprehensive history of nursery education, or even a thorough account of any individual approach. Rather, my purpose is to pick up on certain themes and ways of thinking as a means of opening up space to rethink them in the sections that follow. Thus forewarned, we can begin our 'pop history tour'².

The idea that young children learn best through their senses - that they learn by 'doing' in interaction with the environment around them - has a long history. From Johann Amos Comenius' *Didactica Magna* (1910 [1632]) onwards the education of children under the age of 6 has largely concerned itself with engaging the senses (Lascarides and Hinitz, 2000; Peltzman, 1998). Many of the so-called 'pioneers' (see Brooker, 2005) whose names litter the nursery tradition are famous for the innovative ways in which they offered physical materials to children so as to actively engage their bodies in learning. Not least among these 'great pioneers' is Friedrich Froebel, widely credited as the 'father of the kindergarten' (by Curtis and Carter, 2003, for example). Froebel is perhaps most famous for his system of 'self-directing', concrete, manipulable materials - his 'gifts' and 'occupations' (Froebel, 1932, see also Wiggin and Smith, 1896a, 1896b, 1900). Various adaptations of these can be found in many contemporary nurseries, although their use now tends to be less structured than Froebel envisaged. Indeed, inspired by these 'gifts' and 'occupations', Deb Curtis and Margie Carter conceive of the role of nursery educators in terms of offering aesthetically pleasing manipulable materials to children as 'invitations to learning' (2003: 2).

Maria Montessori's work followed on from Froebel in many ways. In her nurseries, Montessori employed not 'teachers' or 'educators' but 'directresses'³. They did not direct the children, however, at least not in any straightforward way. Montessori's directresses were to organise and arrange materials 'with attention to order, aesthetics and sensory exploration' (Curtis and Carter, 2003: 2), to produce 'self-directing' learning environments in which children could be 'free' to explore and learn at their own pace (Montessori, 1912, 1917, 1988, see also

Lascarides and Hinitz, 2000; Peltzman, 1998). Thus, both Montessori and Froebel understood learning as occurring through the embodied and sensory interactions between individual children and the material environment around them; the task of educating young children, then, is one of devising and arranging materials, such that those materials 'do' the teaching.

In the latter half of the 20th century, nursery education found scientific confirmation for its belief in concrete 'hands-on learning materials and experiences' (Curtis and Carter, 2003: 2) in Piagetian developmental psychology. Piaget is notable not only for having produced the universal and deterministic staged model of child development which he is (im)famous (see, for example, James, Jenks and Prout, 1998); he also understood learning as an individualistic constructivism, an active process through which individual children assimilate and adapt to the physical environment around them (1952, 1954, see also Corsaro, 1997; MacNaughton, 2003). Such developmentalism remains a strong influence in the imagination of contemporary preschool education. The High/Scope movement, which has spread far beyond its origins in Michigan, USA, in the 1970s, explicitly sites its 'cognitively-oriented curriculum' within a developmental framework. That is, High/Scope provide a full range of 'key' experiences to ensure 'normal' child development (Hohmann, Banet and Weikart, 1979, see also Curtis and Carter, 2003; MacNaughton 2003). To achieve this High/Scope educators organise and plan their material environments into a series of 'learning centres' or 'activity areas', such as the block play area, the sand pit and the doll corner. In this way, they embed the curriculum in the learning environment, planning and resourcing their environments to sign-post and create pathways to particular learning goals (Edwards and Knight, 1994).

High/Scope does not conceive of learning as an entirely individual process, however. Inspired by social constructivist developmental psychologies (largely in the Vygotskian tradition), High/Scope also attends to the social processes of learning. Vygotsky (1978, see also Corsaro 1997) understood learning as occurring in what he termed the 'zone of proximal development' between children's actual level of development (what they can achieve

individually) and a potential level of future development (which they are only able to achieve with the support of adults or their peers at present). Jerome Bruner has famously referred to this as the 'social scaffolding' of learning (MacNaughton, 2003). This is manifested in the daily High/Scope 'plan-do-review' routine (Hohmann, Banet and Weikart, 1979) in which children begin each day by negotiating with educators to plan their activities for that day before going off to carry them out independently. At the end of each day the children return to their educators to reflect upon their progress in those activities. In this way, the High/Scope approach provides a social framework within which children can engage in experiential learning in a carefully planned material environment.

The Reggio Emilia approach to preschool education (the final stop on our short tour), draws upon many of the same influences as High/Scope, but brings them together in slightly different ways. Most interesting for my purposes here is the way in which Reggio Emilia educators conceive of the learning environment as an educator in its own right, as a 'space that teaches' (Gandini, 1998). Yet, this is not simply the concrete environment, but a 'total environment' with social, cultural, discursive as well as physical characteristics (Nutbrown and Abbott, 2001; Moss and Petrie, 2002). Thus, the Reggio Emilia approach can be said to conceive of a broader socio-materiality, such that learning can be understood to occur in the relations between people, and between people and 'things'.

Emerging from in-between things

Beyond all doubt, young children learn from action ... *it is action and interaction with people and things that count* (Greenman, 1988: 29, my emphasis).

Moving forward from this highly selective history, I want to begin to make tactical use of the proposition that '[m]ateriality is agency' (as suggested by Dewsbury *et al*, 2002: 439). This proposal only starts to make sense in the context of a broader reconsideration of subjectivity and materiality, of what we understand it is to be human. This requires nothing less than an

ontological shift. The accounts of subjectification so briefly discussed in the introduction presume a particular relationship between subject and object as, admittedly, do the ideas that characterise the nursery tradition. There is a straightforwardness to their materialism: matter is understood as concrete - as real, grounded, and physical (see Kearnes, 2003, for a similar commentary on materiality as deployed in the geographical literature). An inert world of 'dead matter' is opposed to the immaterial, the world of representation and ideas that constitutes our subjectivity (Anderson, 2004⁴). Despite my earlier comment about the 'socio-materiality' of the Reggio Emilia approach, the material in 'total environments' may become caught up in a range of social, cultural and discursive relations, but it remains stubbornly physical and inert nonetheless.

What I have tried to bring out in my strategic history, however, is the crucial role that objects play in the performance of subjects. In this sense, we can start to think about how materials could have some 'life', not in the usual human sense, and certainly not any life of their own, but one in interaction with others (see Thrift, 1996). This is reminiscent of Jane Bennett's (2001) 'enchanted materialism', which seeks to affirm the liveliness of matter without reducing it to human faculties like 'imagination' or 'will' (Anderson, 2004). This ontological flattening, which makes no *a priori* distinction or hierarchisation between subject and object, could be said to evoke a symmetrical anthropology in Latour's terms, redefining humans as networked 'mediators': '[t]he human is in the delegation itself, in the pass, in the sending, in the continuous exchange of forms' (1993: 138). Accordingly, to claim that 'materiality is agency' is more than to attempt to enliven the material; it also begins to 'depersonalise' the self. That is not to say that we should think in terms of a 'post-human' geography. For all the talk of the 'impersonal' in this paper:

'[T]he environments of our daily chores, [our nurseries] ... are indeed ours; this is a *human* geography - "a passage that is experienced and real. A *duration* (Deleuze, 1988: 39)". The point is to build the strange ballet of uncertainty, of catastrophic (unfair)

accident, of things in themselves, into our stories' (Dewsbury, 2000: 492, original emphasis).

Thus, while the proposition 'materiality is agency' makes no *a priori* distinction between human subjects and inhuman objects; the two emerge from it as distinct entities. It implies an emergent and constitutionally unfinished 'almost-not quite' ontology in which all being is becoming (Thrift, 1996). Brian Massumi articulates this in terms of the primacy of process and change over concrete forms and stasis. By primacy, however, he does not mean that process transcends stasis, or that it comes first in a simple chronology; it is more a question of emphasis, of priority without prior-ness. It is in this sense that he is able to claim that: 'a thing is when it isn't doing ... concrete is as concrete doesn't' (2002a: 6). Here Massumi draws on Bergson's (1998) account of the paradox of Zeno's arrow (see also Dewsbury, 2000). For Bergson, the arrow moves not between discernible points on its passage from bow to target; it moves because it is never in any point at all, it is always in-between, in transit across them all. The individual positions can be identified only retrospectively.

Marcus Doel's 'post-structuralist' geography understands the world as always in-between. In rejecting 'pointillism', thinking in terms of the back-formed 'bits' and 'pieces' that appear to make up the world, Doel favours an ongoing 'scrumpled' geography modelled on the art of origami (1996, see also 1999). Drawing on Deleuze's Baroque Leibnizism (see Deleuze, 2006), Doel argues that 'we' are not points but folds, always in the process of folding. This begins to explain another of Dewsbury and colleagues' tactics⁵: '[s]pace is a verb not a noun' (2002: 439). Thinking in terms of 'spacing', as process, rather than space, as an entity, is to think in terms of becomings. It is to begin from Deleuze and Guattari's assertion that '[w]e are not in the world, *we become with the world*' (1994: 169, my emphasis).

In this way, we can begin to think of subjects and objects as points that emerge from the world in process:

‘It is from the active, productive, and continual weaving of the multiplicity of bits and pieces that we emerge ... The ‘I’, the bounded subject, stands after these compositions as a mythical unity’ (Harrison, 2000: 502).

The subject may be a (momentary) outcome, rather than a cause, but it is both real and actual regardless. There is a minimal subjectivity in becoming (Dewsbury, 2000). The emergent subject is more than the ‘classical’ poststructural subject: a multiple and contingent ‘trace’ rather than a ‘cipher’ (Thrift, 1996). To think of subjectivity in this way is to reject the claim that, at least until recently⁶, has exemplified the conceptual and ethical moment of the ‘new social studies of childhood’ almost in their entirety: that children should be studied ‘as social actors, as beings in their own right rather than pre-adult becomings’ (Holloway and Valentine, 2000: 5). Admittedly, what the ‘new social studies of childhood’ rejects is the (over)determination of children as future-adults-in-the-making, particularly when understood in terms of linear and universal child development, in favour of taking them seriously in the present tense. Unfortunately, the result has been to vilify the very notion of becoming, leaving only a static and coherent model of subjectivity which makes it very difficult to think through children’s insistent and strikingly apparent changeability.

It seems to me that thinking of the world in as always-already in process might allow us to conceive of the experiential and environmental processes of learning in the nursery differently. Indeed, thinking in terms of a performative pedagogy of the event may allow us to think difference, rather than identity. Representational thought, in proceeding through judgement and analogy, is unable to think of anything other than stasis and identity. Instead Deleuze proposes that thinking in terms of difference-in-itself is to open up to the world as

always-already in process (1994). With this in mind I want to revisit the initial claim of the nursery tradition: that young children learn best through their senses.

Engaging the senses

'As children work with these materials, they are learning about themselves and their role using the physical properties of the world. Children are transfixed by looking at, touching, tasting, and moving and rearranging things. As they absorb the rich sensory information around them, their brain pathways are making connections that will be the foundation for a lifetime of experience and learning' (Curtis and Carter, 2003: 106).

Deb Curtis and Margie Carter are alluding to the latest scientific rationalisation of the traditional practice of nursery education: neuroscience. This may provide a useful point of departure. Conceiving of the self as emerging from a series of impersonal connections formed in the brain (see also Deleuze, 1995) might help us to start to think of an 'affective materialism': 'a materialism that thinks through how a quasi-idealist/quasi-corporeal dimension of affect is internal, rather than in supplement or opposition, to materiality (Anderson, 2004: page/s). For both Deleuze and preschool education, '[o]n the path which leads to that which is being thought, all begins with sensibility' (1994: 144). Deleuze's deployment of sensibility, however, differs radically from that employed in the nursery tradition. Deleuze does not advocate a straightforward empiricism in which experience is understood as a first principle from which all else proceeds. Thinking as such is to posit a badly formed question (see Deleuze, 1991): 'It is not the question "Does the intelligible come from the sensible?" but a quite different proposition, that of relations' (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002: 55). Yet, these relations are external to their terms: '[r]elations are in the middle, and exist as such' (*ibid*: 55). Deleuze's empiricism, therefore, is a *transcendal empiricism*; what transcends is an in-betweenness, a being-in-relation.

As neither the body or the subject, nor sense data from the 'real' world outside the self, the sensate can be conceived of as such an in-betweenness (Harrison, 2000). To think of sensation in this way is to produce an impersonal and asubjective account of the world; one of affects rather than affections, percepts not perceptions:

'Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts and affects are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 164, original emphasis).

Speaking in terms of affects and percepts, Deleuze and Guattari break down sensation into its 'brute, felt, building blocks' (Dewsbury, 2003: 1914). But, affects and percepts are attributable to neither a subject, nor an object which appears to be affecting that subject; they belong to the relation itself, that which is between both subject and object, and from which they emerge. This explains Massumi's insistence that all of this is 'nothing personal' (2002a). As Dewsbury and colleagues put it:

'Affects are not about *you* or *it*, subject or object. They are relations that inspire the world ... affects and percepts are that through which subject and object emerge and become possible, they speak to the emergent eventuality of the world' (2002: 439, original emphasis).

Thinking through the sensible - rather than the senses - allows us to think outwith a framework of representational subjectivity. It is to conceive of the impersonality of 'life' in the immanence and intangibility of the event (Dewsbury, 2003). This virtuality⁷ is what Thrift is referring to when he speaks of the 'push' of life (2004) or what Massumi terms the 'flash' (2002b).



Figure 1: water play

But, what could it mean to think of the sensibility of the nursery? The photograph (figure 1) shows a group of 4-year-old boys engaged in water play with a selection of cups and bubbles: a fairly typical scene in most nurseries. Curtis and speak of the ‘magic’ and ‘wonder’ of active sensory exploration and the almost miraculous things this can achieve:

‘Embedded within the seemingly magical phenomena of rainbows, shadows, gems, and the rustling of trees in the wind are important concepts related to physics, science, and math’ (2003: 122).

Less romantically⁸, we might conceive of water play in terms of ‘miraculation’ or ‘fabulation’, of the affects and percepts that constitute ‘blocs of becoming’. For Deleuze and Guattari ‘[w]e write not with childhood memories but through blocs of childhood that are the becoming-child of the present’ (1994: 168). Or, in the terms used in *A Thousand Plateaus*, ‘unnatural participations’ in heterogenous assemblages constitute blocs of becoming from which subject and object emerge (1988). Understood in this way, the water, the bubbles and the cups do not represent the various properties of the world, nor do they represent the

concepts related to scientific or mathematical apprehension of them. Rather, the act of playing, the encounter between the boys and these materials can be said to enact these properties. It is an 'experiment' that produces becomings-science and becomings-maths, among myriad other potential and actual becomings. Both the boys and the materials emerge from this virtual event, '[l]argely the same but with some difference - if only by virtue of having come to be themselves again' (Massumi, 2002a: 232).

In a similar spirit, Kevin Hetherington takes James Gibson's (1986) notion of 'affordances' to think through the ways in which subject and object are blurred in such encounters, such that meaning is generated in the 'space of affordances' between them. Hetherington argues: '[h]umans do not act as subjects in an object world but are constituted as perceiving beings at the interface between subject and object' (2003: 1938). He contends that the distinction between experiencing subject (the boys) and experienced object (the water, the bubbles, the cups) dissolves in the idea of *praesentia*: 'a subjectivity *found* through the encounter with what is at hand' (*ibid*: 1941, original emphasis). Or, to elaborate:

'Praesentia is a way of knowing the world that is both inside and outside of knowledge as a set of represented practices. It is also performative and generative of knowledge communicated other than through representation. Both as a form of *the present* and a form of *presencing something absent*, it can be found in tacitly skilled, haptic reaching out and does not presume in advance the necessity of a visual act of representation, let alone its outcome as knowledge that can be communicated discursively to others. Rather, praesentia presumes only an involvement and a confirmation of subject formation in the materiality of the world' (*ibid*: 1937, original emphasis).

The point here is not that such sensate encounters are in some way non-cognitive, that we should allow for the existence of 'non-cognitive facts' (Thrift, 1996); it is more that the sensate

constitutes the 'unthought in thought', an unthought which is 'not external to thought but lies at its very heart' (Deleuze, 1988: 97). Sensate encounters can be said to be enactments from which cognition emerges:

'[P]articipation precedes recognition: *being precedes cognition*. The separately recognisable, speakable identities of the objects and subjects involved in the unfolding event come into definition only retrospectively. In the event, they are inseparable from the immediacy of the relation' (Massumi, 2002a: 231, original emphasis).

That being so, we can start to think of the event not as a subject, but the conditions from which one can emerge. The emergent subject is actualised from the impersonal forces and relations - the affects and percepts - that are enacted and assembled in the event, its apparent unity is simply a holding-together which allows us to appear to ourselves as agents (Dewsbury, 2000). The event is folded into and precipitative of a subject (Deleuze, 2006), but it is impersonal nevertheless, '[s]ubjectification isn't anything to do with a 'person': it's a specific collective individuation relating to an event' (Deleuze, 1995: 99).

A pedagogy of the event

Thinking in terms of a pedagogy of the event is to think of 'emergence' rather than 'development'. Within the educational literature there is much talk of emergence, of 'emergent curricula' (see MacNaughton, 2003) and 'interactive pedagogy' (Fendler, 2001). Indeed, such practices explicitly advocate a pedagogy of in-betweenness: neither 'child-centred' nor 'teacher-directed' but which occurs in the interaction between teacher and child. The Reggio Emilia preschools are often lauded on this very basis, for practising a 'pedagogy of listening and relationships' (Moss and Petrie, 2002) which emphasises 'negotiated learning' (Forman and Fyfe, 1998) such that the curriculum can be understood

as 'a metaphorical dance between teacher and child' (Rinaldini, in Valentine, 2003). While such practices are ostensibly contingent, they are premised on an all too human model of subjectification, and they are targeted to achieve predetermined ends:

'The procedures used in interactive pedagogies may appear to be free because they are not specified in advance; but the success of such a pedagogy is evaluated according to the degree to which a specific outcome is achieved. The procedure may be flexible, but the outcome is ironically predetermined. Flexible interactive pedagogies are not necessarily instances of freedom or emancipation but rather effective and efficient technologies for attaining predetermined socially stipulated outcomes' (Fendler, 2001: 133)

The problem here could be said to be one of ethics: a failure to become worthy of the event in all its singularity (Deleuze, 2004), to still the incessant emergence of the event and to close off its indeterminate openness. 'De-eventualising' the nursery renders the objects and subjects that make it up docile and lifeless (Dewsbury, 2000; 2003; Doel, 1999; Harrison, 2000; 2002; Thrift, 1996; 2004; Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000). Quite simply, it produces a fatalistic and over-determined account of the nursery. Perhaps the problem here is the imperialism of contemporary preschool pedagogy in its attempts to determine ever more of the child. Lynn Fendler (2001) has argued that the current drive towards a totalising 'whole child' education has effected a shift in the 'substance' to be educated. By this, she means that while earlier educational imperatives were targeted at specific parts of the child - the intellect or the morals - 'whole child' education also orients itself towards desire: the spirit, soul, motivations, wishes, pleasure and inclinations of the child. Even fantasy is an educational resource in the nursery (Paley, 2004). Fendler attributes this to the need to educate ideal advanced liberal subjects: 'entrepreneurial selves' who desire their own fulfillment (see also Rose, 1999).

Yet, desire need not be understood as a lack to be filled, as the Lacanian psychoanalytic account goes, nor indeed as some kind of 'substance' to be moulded. Instead, desire might be thought of as process - as impetuous, disorderly and irreducible emergence (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003). Deleuze and Guattari understand desire as constituting a 'body without organs'. This is not a body in the straightforward sense, but a virtual body, a body from the point of view of its potential⁹ (Harrison, 2000). The 'organism' or subject emerges as a stratification or determination of this virtual body, as 'a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation that, in order to extract useful labour from the [body without organs], imposed upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchised organisations, organised transcendences' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 159). For Massumi (2002a) this is a process not simply of actualising potential, the affects and percepts enacted in the event, but of capturing this in habit, delimiting it simply as possibility. In this sense we might think of the nursery as setting up myriad apparatuses of capture (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) which personalise and domesticate the event (Massumi, 2002b).

While this stratification may reduce the potential of the body to do things otherwise; '[s]taying stratified - organised, signified, subjected - is not the worst that can happen' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 161). Stratifications and subjectifications are the very things that enable us to act: 'you have to keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to enable you to respond to the dominant reality' (*ibid.*: 160). There is a need to hold on to some subjectivity, the minimal subjectivity enacted in a doing that will allow the event(s) of the world to go on without dissolving entirely within them (Dewsbury, 2000). 'We' are able to sustain ourselves by keeping things in motion, in the eternal return of difference-producing-repetition (Deleuze, 1994), such that 'we' are never static even if we appear as such. While the event is underway, however, there can be no guarantee of the outcome. Becomings are always to some degree speculative:

‘Every experience, as it happens, carries a fringe of active indetermination. Experience underway is a constitutionally vague ‘something doing’ in the world ... Subject and object are embedded in the situational relation in a way that cannot be fully determined in advance. As long as the event is ongoing, its outcome even slightly uncertain, their contextual identity is open to amendment’ (Massumi, 2002a: 232).

Playing with things: embracing the indeterminate?

There is always something excessive about the event, an inherent openness that defies any absolute predetermination: potential disorder lurks within the ordering process itself. But, that is not to say that attempts cannot be made to capture the event and shape its outcomes in various ways: ‘[i]ndeterminacy and determination, change and freeze framing, go together’ (Massumi, 2002a: 8). While the event itself may be intangible, the world that continually emerges through it is not, and the two are entirely inter-related:

‘[T]he relativity between all the components ‘present’ for an event to exist is inclusive - everything has equal comport within the event itself... objects are as important to the event as you are take them away and the event changes, you change, thus completely recasting the notion of the subject’ (Dewsbury, 2000: 491).

In this way we might begin to think of nursery pedagogy as attempting to regulate ‘the combinations (doses) of aggregates’ (Harrison, 2000: 513). The practice of arranging nursery environments into learning centres could be viewed as an attempt to control and delimit the event - to ‘de-eventualise’ it - to offer possibilities rather than to engage with potential. Much as Montessori employed ‘directresses’, Curtis and Carter, advocate that, among other things, nursery educators should be ‘prop managers’: ‘[t]he idea here is not to be policing the

materials, but allowing the children to stay focused and engaged' (2003: 187)¹⁰. The practice of nursery education, then, is very much concerned with 'dosing' the aggregates:

'The presentation of materials makes a difference in how children respond to them. Make sure the arrangement is orderly and attractive and that it suggests possibilities for use. Baskets, trays, tubs, mirrors, or other surfaces define the area and help children focus their attention on what is available. Avoid the cluttering effect of combining different-looking implements and utensils together in one arrangement. Offer sets of things that match and complement each other so the children have a clearer view of what is there and how it might be used' (*ibid*: 106)

Changing the material organisation of the nursery, whether disordering or re-ordering, has very real consequences in terms of the events that are afforded and the subjects that can emerge. Glenda MacNaughton's collaborative action research project aimed to alter the gender relations in a group of Australian preschool classrooms. One of the educators involved, Nette, was having difficulty convincing her colleagues that the curriculum should be concerned with more than simply how and when materials should be presented to children:

'[W]hether you have playdough before milk and fruit, or after... Should you have cutters and things with the [play]dough or should you just let them manipulate it?... Well that's what they're calling curriculum' (in Macnaughton, 2000: 179).

This may seem prosaic, but these are very real concerns for nursery educators who worry that too early an introduction to cutters or rolling pins might inhibit children's creative exploration of the physical properties of the playdough itself. Introducing such materials could take the play in all manner of unwanted directions. MacNaughton agrees with Nette that, if they want to practice for 'gender-equity' rather than simply (child) development, preschool educators need to think beyond the materiality of the curriculum.

Nevertheless, Nette's personal gender equity project centred around the material organisation of 'learning centres'. She wanted to disrupt the taken-for-granted gender roles in her classroom, which she saw as embedded within the material organisation of the nursery. In common with many other preschool educators, Nette wanted to disrupt the notion that 'blocks were for boys and home corner for girls' (*ibid*: 180). Gender issues are often understood as territorialised in the block play and the home corner areas of preschool classrooms, and their resolution is believed to lie in reconfiguring these areas in various ways (for example, Curtis and Carter, 2003; Davies, 1989; Paley, 1984). Nette's response was explicitly to 'present kindergarten equipment to children in a manner which discourages gender bias' (in MacNaughton, 2000: 162); specifically, to bring the outside blocks inside and combine them with the home corner equipment. This proved a controversial move, however, with other educators in the research group. Edna, in particular, argued that there was a need to separate the two because they afforded specific and distinctive learning experiences:

'It gives a sense of order and categories for children... we are preparing children for the next step. It's why we are doing it... We would have to look very closely to justify ourselves if we were doing it differently. If we had everything down one end of the room and the children just went and got whatever they wanted to use wherever and however they wanted... (fades). I know a lot of teachers who would get very upset if the children moved the equipment together' (*ibid*: 163).

For Edna such experimentation with room arrangement was dangerous, even upsetting. Not only might it impede 'normal' child development, but it could also enact all kinds of 'potential monstrosities' (Dewsbury, 2000: 491). While Edna was committed to achieving gender equity, she believed that such re-orderings would most likely enact unhelpful and unpredictable disorderings. Messing with things in the nursery can be perilous!

There can, however, be great rewards for nursery educators who are willing to countenance, indeed risk, some indeterminacy. Curtis and Carter believe that the standardised and sanitised materials made available to children in preschool education can have damaging effects (or produce problematic affects). Without ignoring 'health and safety', they advocate the use of 'open-ended', 'indeterminate' materials¹¹ in the nursery:

'In addition to keeping children safe, you want to challenge their minds, bodies and social skills with materials that invite more complex play, collaboration, problem solving, and creativity... They benefit from working with more than a standard set of unit blocks, Lego building blocks, people and animal props. The skills and knowledge children possess and are eager to acquire usually surpass the limited learning opportunities of early childhood materials designed for specific uses' (2003: 69).

Curtis and Carter believe that play with 'open-ended' materials can enact particular kinds of becomings. By inviting movement, manipulation, investigation, experimentation, creation and problem solving, 'indeterminate' materials 'encourage children to become flexible thinkers and responsive playmates' (*ibid*: 57). In addition, they believe that introducing all manner of recycled and natural materials will produce subjects who are both flexible and sustainable.

Despite the promise of such materials, Curtis and Carter remain somewhat wary of them. Play with loose parts and found materials is risky: 'successful operations require eternal vigilance to ensure that they are in no way infected by disorderly and entropic tendencies' (Edensor, 2005: 313). Yet the inherent openness of the event means that all material in the nursery must be carefully managed. Materials need to be ordered and arranged to compensate for and control their inherent disorderly, and disordering, tendencies:

‘There is a delicate balance between offering children a range of interesting materials and avoiding clutter and an over-emphasis on ‘stuff’... When children come upon a cluttered shelf with a pile of materials in textures and colours that have no relationship to each other, they are less likely to be able to see what is available for their use ... If they live in mess, disorder, and clutter, they will likely create more disorder, rather than using the materials thoughtfully’ (Curtis and Carter, 2003: 182).

If nursery educators want to enact particular processes of subjectification, they must be careful lest things descend into ‘chaos’.

(im)material (dis)orderings: in lieu of a conclusion

‘What we lack most is a belief in the world, we’ve quite lost the world, it’s been taken from us. If you believe in the world you precipitate events, however inconspicuous, that elude control, you engender new space-times, however small their surface or volume... Our ability to resist control, or our submission to it, has to be assessed at the level of our every move. We need both creativity *and* a people’ (Deleuze, 1995: 176).

Throughout this paper I have been attempting to think through how we might produce a less fatalistic account of nursery education such that we might conceive of subjectification as not ‘innocent’ but necessary nevertheless. This could be said to be little more than a task of ‘witnessing’ the nursery: attending to the encounters that open it up while resisting the imperialistic urge to totalise and explain. Conceiving of an impersonal, but no less subjectifying for that, pedagogy of the event is an attempt to witness the nursery in this way:

‘[It] means s thinking about what is going on, to think of events rather than subjectivities, to realise that there are hidden, intangible, associations (affects and percepts) of

emotion, desire and faith existing between subject (individual body) and object (material world)' (Dewsbury, 2003: 1915).

However, affirmation of the world in as ever-contingent, always becoming-otherwise, is not necessarily to introduce a naive utopianism or an unstoppable vitalism. Paul Harrison (forthcoming) reminds us that Deleuze's vitalism, his 'affirmation of the multiple' (2004), cannot be understood other than with reference to his stoicism, such that the world does not simply overflow with meaning but emerges from and because of the disaster of meaningless.

An understanding of the world through relations of 'speed and slowness' (Doel, 1999) must also consider the stillings and slowings which hold it back, hold it in place, as much as the ways in which it picks up speed. We should consider the world as lessening as well as in plenitude (Anderson, 2004). In thinking of a pedagogy of the event, we may affirm the potential disorder that is immanent to, and can be enacted within, its myriad orderings - we may introduce some hope, but it is always a hope without guarantee (Massumi, 2002b). As Peter Moss and Pat Petrie (2002) note, amidst the potential of the nursery, its becomings-otherwise, we necessarily find instrumentality and closure all the same. In all its (dis)ordering (im)materiality, a pedagogy of the event introduces some optimism but only does so in the face of despair. Defeat may always be momentary¹², but it occurs nonetheless. Strangely enough, this need not be pessimistic so long as 'we' continue to experiment in the event: 'Bleak it is at first glance. But is ultimately joyous' (Massumi, 1992: 40).

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¹ By the nursery I am thinking of those institutions concerned with the education of preschool children, particularly those between the ages of 3 and 5 within the various national systems within the UK. Internationally, it is more common to talk in terms of a broader early childhood education encompassing the age range from birth to 8 but this is by no means an homogenous field. While there has been some movement towards an equivalent idea of 'early years' education within the UK in recent years, the education of children between 3 and 5 remains a distinct stage within this with its own curriculum guidance which draws on the principles distinctive to the nursery (or kindergarten) tradition in education. However, while the nursery may be a peculiarly British institution in many ways, more or less equivalent institutions do exist in most educational systems in the 'global north'.

² I intend this to resonate in various ways. Most obviously, in the light of the theoretical influences in this paper, it alludes to Deleuze's urgings towards a 'pop philosophy' (1995). Also, the irreverent tone introduced by such allusions to a 'celebrity tour' of the nursery tradition touch upon Richard Johnson's frustration with what he terms the 'cargo cult' mentality of, particularly Anglo-American, preschool educators such that they unreflectively latch on to each new idea only to move on when the next ship comes in (2000). In this sense, the celebrity 'pioneers' of the nursery tradition can be said to have a cult following. Johnson is particularly suspicious of the current fad for uncritically appropriating the Reggio Emilia approach. While I think Johnson may be a little uncharitable to nursery educators, the history of nursery education does resemble that of a succession of celerity followings.

³ Montessori's use of the term 'directresses' very much reflects the assumptions of the time in which she was working.

⁴ Ben Anderson intends this to resonate with calls for a performative and 'non-representational' enlivening of our 'dead geographies' (Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000, see also Thrift, 2004), which may be somewhat akin to what I am trying to do here.

⁵ Dewsbury and colleagues list 14 'tactical suggestions' or 'disposable maxims' for 'presenting' or 'witnessing' the world. It would be far beyond the scope of this paper to examine the list in its entirety, but the final two suggestions seem particularly apt in terms of my discussion here.

⁶ In his recent work Alan Prout has begun to distance himself from a project for which he is largely responsible, admitting that the limits of the 'new paradigm for the social study of childhood' are becoming increasingly apparent (2005).

⁷ For Deleuze, purely actual objects do not exist, but are always surrounded by a 'cloud' of virtual uncertainty and indeterminacy in the event: 'Actuals imply already constituted individuals, and are ordinarily determined, whereas the relationship of the actual and the virtual forms and acting individuation or a highly specific and remarkable singularisation which needs to be attended to case by case' (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002: 152). Brian Massumi makes much of the distinction between possibility and potential in the actualisation of the virtual, such that possibility understood as a restricted range of potential; possibility is what a thing can become without ceasing to be itself (1992). Yet, possibility acts to constrain potential: '[p]ossibility is back-formed from potential's unfolding. But once it is formed, it also effectively feeds back in. Feedback, it prescripts... possibilities delineate a region of nominally defining - that is, normative - variation. Potential is unprescripted. It only feeds forward, unfolding toward the registering of an event: bull's-eye. Possibility is a variation implicit in what a thing can be said to be when it is on target. Potential is the immanence of

a thing to its still indeterminate variation, underway. Implication is a code word. Immanence is process' (Masumi, 2002a: 9).

⁸ Curtis and Carter begin their book with a quote from Anita Olds which sets the tone of the discussion throughout: '[c]hildren are miracles. Believing that every child is a miracle can transform the way we design for children's care. When we invite a miracle into our lives, we prepare ourselves and the environment around us. We may set out flowers or special offerings. We may cleanse ourselves, the space, or our thoughts of everything but the love inside us. We make it our job to create, with reverence and gratitude, a space that is worthy of a miracle!' (Olds, 1999, in Curtis and Carter, 2003). Such romanticism is not atypical in certain quarters of the nursery educational literature.

⁹ The body without organs is a concept which seems to cause particular difficulty in Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy. It is not the body in and straightforward sense: '[t]hink of the body without organs outside of any determinate state... this is the body from the point of view of its potential, its virtuality' (Masumi, 1992: 70). It is without organs because it is not reducible to an 'organism' and does not belong to a subject, it opens on to the impersonal affects and percepts of the event. The personalised affections and perceptions of particular bodies are actualised from the event. As such, '[y]ou can never reach the body without organs ... you are forever attaining it' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 150) .

¹⁰ This is not in any way to imply that preschool educators somehow stand outside the event, that they can stand outwith processes of subjectification and objectification. Both children and nursery educators are caught up and continually emerge from the eventuality of it.

¹¹ This may seem odd, given that one of the claims in this paper is that all materials are in some way indeterminate and open-ended. However, Curtis and Carter are referring to a specific type of material used in preschool education. Traditional nursery resources are purpose-designed and 'self-directing', whereas 'found' or recycled materials - cardboard

tubing, pine-cones, material remnants - have no predetermined use in the nursery. Such materials are generally associated with 'creative' or 'artistic' activities in nursery curricula.

¹² This alludes to a line in Peter Jackson's remake of *King Kong* (2005): 'Defeat is always momentary'. Despite Carl Denham's various attempts to come out on top, the film ends in disaster. We are told that what we have come to learn about the film-maker is that he has an 'unfailing ability to destroy the things he loves'. Denham's optimism and opportunism, then, do not by any means guarantee success. Despite this, Denham keeps going, continually striving to turn things to his advantage.

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